

VZCZCXRO9190
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DE RUEHSK #0133 1161212
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 261212Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0237
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHSK/AMEMBASSY MINSK 0241

UNCLAS MINSK 000133

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: BELARUS: DEMONSTRATORS, POLICE CALM AT APRIL 26 PROTEST

REF: A) MOORE-BOEHME E-MAIL 03/25/09, B) MINSK 106

¶1. (U) About 700-800 protestors gathered peacefully met in front of the Academy of Sciences Sunday April 26 for the annual Chernobyl March, marking the 23rd anniversary of the nuclear disaster. A variety of groups were represented, including the Young Belarus and European Belarus movements, the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party, Belarusian Popular Front, United Civic Party, and Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC). Various persons addressed the crowd, noting the terrible impact of the disaster on Belarus, and calling for a halt to the construction of a nuclear power plant in the country.

¶2. (U) The uniformed police presence was extremely light during the first phase, although plainclothes security forces and state media were present in small groups at the periphery of the gathering. After about an hour, participants were asked to choose between following a march route approved by local authorities, or heading in the opposite direction towards the center of town. After about 15 minutes, half the crowd had crossed the street by an underground passage, and stayed in place. A group of roughly 30 fully-equipped Spetsnaz riot police took up position about 50 yards in front of the protestors, with a similar number joining them some minutes later.

¶3. (U) About six young female protestors carrying Young Belarus and European Belarus flags, approached the riot police, followed by a good number of the remainder. The police held their ground, not striking the protestors or taking their flags. After 20 minutes of this standoff, the protestors reversed course and dispersed, with the police breaking formation and leaving the scene.

Comment

¶4. (SBU) Observers of events in Belarus will note that this was a rather small number of protestors, even compared with the 1000 or so who attended the March 25 event (ref A). The diplomatic community was somewhat sparsely represented as well; two junior international staff from the OSCE Office, the British Charge, and a mid-level Czech diplomat joined our Charge and PAO. The reasons for the low turnout of Belarusians can be debated: BPC chair Sergey Kalyakin told Charge that frustration with the poorly-organized March 25 protest -- in which participants took several different and contradictory courses of action -- was a factor. Certainly the beautiful spring weather did not keep anyone away. Reports of actions by the authorities behind the scenes still need to be reviewed. However, the professional, public response of the police at this protest, as on March 25, is a marked improvement over forced dispersal of demonstrators in February (an action which may have contributed to Interior Minister Navumau's dismissal, ref B). Post will continue to follow such events closely; a possible unilateral protest by Malady Front on May 14 is the only one planned by the opposition in the near future.

